

## [Review] Mauro P. Calcagno (2012) From madrigal to opera: Monteverdi's staging of the self

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Mauro P. Calcagno. *From Madrigal to Opera: Monteverdi's Staging of the Self*

From Madrigal to Opera: Monteverdi's Staging of the Self by Mauro P. Calcagno

Review by: Nicholas Till

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Mauro P. Calcagno. *From Madrigal to Opera: Monteverdi's Staging of the Self*.

Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012. xii + 329 pp. \$60. ISBN: 978-0-520-26768-8.

Claudio Monteverdi's eight books of madrigals, published between 1587 and 1638 (the ninth book was a posthumous compilation), form the backbone of Monteverdi's career, charting his development as a composer as definitively as do, say, the thirty-two piano sonatas of Beethoven's. But, of course, Monteverdi was also foundational in the development of opera, and the core thesis of Mauro Calcagno's important new study of Monteverdi is that "the madrigal was the genre through which Monteverdi was able to experiment with narrative solutions that served him in the new genre of opera" (263). In itself this is not a novel observation, although scholars are nowadays chary of presenting it as some sort of inevitable progress from old-fashioned Renaissance polyphony to modern dramatic monody. Indeed, many commentators have regretted that the complexity of Monteverdi's presentation of subjectivity and narrative in his madrigals is lost in the solo forms of opera.

But the question remains as to what we mean by *dramatic*. At times it seems that musicologists intend little more than "rhetorically expressive." It is in readdressing this question that Calcagno opens substantially new fields of inquiry, working with methodologies such as, in his own listing, "linguistics, phenomenology, narratology, theatre and film studies" (4) as analytical tools to reveal Monteverdi's innate theatrical sense. The book opens with a chapter analyzing Monteverdi's first dramatic work, *Orfeo* (1607), to demonstrate the sophistication and complexity of Monteverdi's approach to dramatic presentation: his understanding of the dramatic function of deictics (those floating pronouns that identify time and place — "here," "now" — or that position the subject or object of enunciation — "I," "you"); his distinction between presentational modes (e.g., by allegorical characters such as La Musica, who addresses the audience in the prologue) and representational modes (presenting characters within the frame of the drama); methods of focalization (the presentation of a character or situation through the eyes of another character); and his discovery of the composer's own narrative voice. All of these devices, which are achieved through music, suggest a much more complex understanding of musical dramaturgy than is implied by the idea that the composer's role in opera is simply to convey the meaning of the words. Calcagno also shows how Monteverdi's madrigals and theater works are embedded within broader discursive frameworks.

Having identified these techniques, Calcagno then tracks back to show how they are forged from sixteenth-century madrigal composers' musical interpretations of post-Petrarchan Italian poetry. The Petrarchan subject is a divided subject, and composers employed subtle musical means to represent dispersed selfhoods in their settings of Petrarchan verse. Calcagno seeks to make a case for the influence of Petrarch upon Monteverdi's own development, although, despite Nino Pirrotta's famous assertion that his Petrarchan choices "represent a hidden and protected Monteverdian Secretum" (Nino Pirrotta, *Music and Culture in Italy from the Middle Ages to the Baroque* [1984], 313), Monteverdi rarely set Petrarch. Calcagno himself tells us that he did so only six times, and then, oddly, at a later stage in his career, when the influence of Petrarchan interiority on Italian poetry had given way to the glittering Baroque surfaces of Giambattista Marino, who became Monteverdi's own favored poet. In contrast to many Monteverdi scholars (most notably Gary Tomlinson), who consider the impact of Marino upon Monteverdi to have been baleful, Calcagno pays careful attention to the sophistication of Monteverdi's response to Marino, and in particular to Marino's complex methods of presentational *mise-en-abyme*, which provided Monteverdi with numerous possibilities for exploring what Calcagno describes vividly as his "musical theatre of the mind."

Born in 1567, Monteverdi was an almost exact contemporary of Shakespeare, and is a figure of comparable significance in the historical transition from Renaissance to early modernity. The difference is that for every study of Monteverdi there are (at least) 100 studies of Shakespeare. No one study of Monteverdi's can possibly do justice to the immensity of his achievement, and there are inevitably omissions in this book — the enigmatic seventh book of madrigals and Monteverdi's penultimate opera *Il ritorno d'Ulisse* are hardly mentioned, and the final section on Monteverdi's last opera, *L'incoronazione di Poppea*, doesn't quite deliver. But this is still a rich book that offers invaluable new ways of thinking about Monteverdi's art, opening our eyes and ears to many overlooked facets of Monteverdi's seductive, inventive, and protean genius.

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